

VZCZCXRO5018
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSL RUEHSR
DE RUEHVL #0711/01 3580851
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 240851Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY VILNIUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4027
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VILNIUS 000711

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/24/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [LH](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INITIAL MEETING WITH POLITICAL
ADVISOR TO PRIME MINISTER

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission John M. Finkbeiner for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In a free-ranging discussion with the Ambassador, Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius' new domestic political advisor Virgis Valentinas said that President Dalia Grybauskaitė "has a lot to learn" about how politics work in Lithuania but is doing so quickly, that Lithuania's foreign policy has abandoned strident anti-Russian rhetoric in favor of being more of a team player in NATO and the EU, and that Lithuania remains a staunch ally of the United States. Valentinas, a former journalist, also expressed fears of Russian influence in Lithuanian mass media and discussed strengths and weaknesses of various media outlets. He also said that Lithuanian society has much work ahead of it to eliminate anti-Semitism, and that progress on issues such as ending anti-gay discrimination can happen only slowly because Lithuania is a conservative and Catholic country. End summary.

2. (C) Ambassador Derse met December 16 with Valentinas only days after he joined Kubilius' team as domestic political advisor. He earlier had worked as a newspaper reporter, TV news anchor, foreign-news editor of a wire service and deputy head of the Lithuanian service of Radio Free Europe. In addition to advising on politics, he said he also will help overhaul the prime minister's public-relations operation "because it's not very good at the moment." He said Kubilius needs to stay on-message more often and has difficulty winning acceptance -- and credit -- for his actions. "His decision line is strong and acceptable," Valentinas said, "but the presentation and selling it prove to be more difficult."

Coalition is fragile

3. (C) Valentinas said the ruling coalition in the Seimas (parliament), led by Kubilius' Conservative Party, was fragile. Even within the Conservative Party, he said, communication can be weak and some members cannot be relied upon to toe the party line. He said the split of one coalition member, the National Revival Party, into two factions has been especially problematic because their votes were now unpredictable. The smaller faction has remained in the coalition, while the larger faction is negotiating for a place in the coalition. The larger faction lent its support to the coalition in voting for the 2010 GOL budget this month, but its support was uncertain until the last minute.

4. (C) Grybauskaitė, Valentinas said, is a strong character who wants to get things done very quickly. But he said she lacked knowledge of how to operate within Lithuania's political system, and especially with the Seimas. ("Of course, it's very difficult for a rational person to understand and accept what the Seimas is doing," he added.) He said that while the president has a lot to learn about dealing with the Seimas, "she learns quickly and is starting to understand better."

15. (C) The formation of the Kubilius government and the election of Grybauskaitė just several months later have led to a fundamental shift in Lithuania's foreign policy, Valentinavicius said. Under President Valdas Adamkus, he said, "the usual line was anti-Russian, pro-Lithuanian, pro-American. But the anti-Russianism of Valdas Adamkus was on a rhetorical level only. Russia is always a major geopolitical threat for Lithuania. That is our pain and our problem. The best way to combat this is to become as good a member as possible of the European Union and NATO. For this we don't need anti-Russian rhetoric, we need only to be good Europeans and Atlanticists." Under Adamkus, he said, Lithuania had the reputation of not being a reliable NATO member because its statements on Russia went beyond those of other members. "Now the anti-Russian rhetoric has been put aside," which has helped Lithuania in its relations with EU and NATO partners. But those strengthened partnerships have not come at the expense of relations with the United States, Valentinavicius reassured the Ambassador: "People try to make the point that Lithuania now is less Atlanticist. The relations with the United States are the same, but the oddities of the relationship with Russia have been removed and now we are a normal EU and NATO member."

16. (C) Speaking of the Seimas' investigation into whether Lithuania hosted a CIA detention center several years ago, Valentinavicius said the purpose of the probe was not to examine anything about the relationship with the United States, but to look into possible illegal action by

VILNIUS 00000711 002 OF 003

Lithuanians. "We are now in the process of resolving the problem of the special investigative services not having sufficient civilian control," he said. "Our special services have a habit of taking decisions on their own. We want to find the people responsible for taking decisions that have harmed Lithuania's international reputation."

17. (C) He said he thought ties between the United States and Lithuania would always be strong. "Automatically, people are interested in what our major ally and the major military power in the world is doing. But that is theoretical. However, there have been many emigrants from Lithuania -- every family here has relatives in North America. That makes things more personal."

Russian influence

18. (C) Although those personal connections bind the United States and Lithuania, Valentinavicius pointed out that only about 20 percent of Lithuanians speak English, whereas 80 percent speak Russian. CNN is watched by only about 2 percent of Lithuania's population, but up to 10 percent of the people watch Russian channels such as Pervi Baltiskii Kanal. (He said Lithuanian stations are watched by up to 25 percent of the population.) Beyond the influence of Russian-language media, he said, Russian ownership of Lithuanian media is a concern. "It's a very difficult media situation here. The problem is for Lithuania to have financially viable media outlets. There is great fear that Russians could very easily invest in media here. We already have the Russian bank Snoras that has shares in 'Lietuvos Rytas' (newspaper)," he said.

Problems with media

19. (C) Valentinavicius said Lithuanian media were having financial difficulties in part because they had grown used to a system in which government offices and officials paid them, ostensibly for advertising but actually for positive coverage. "'Lietuvos Rytas' and 'Respublika' (the leading

daily newspapers) were in the habit of living on public money," he said. "The distortion of the media market was huge. I don't know how to repair the damage." He said the Kubilius government had largely ended the practice of funneling money to newspapers and expecting favorable reporting in return. But the GOL does receive EU money that is supposed to be spent on media to advertise and promote EU projects. He said the GOL is trying to come up with ways to spend that money fairly and well: "We are trying to look for mechanisms to regulate public money pouring into media. There are some good things that can be done with government money in the media. But in the old regime, the spending was done without achieving the goals. We need to use the money in a transparent way and not distort the media market."

¶10. (C) Most Lithuanians depend on TV as their primary news source, with Internet sites running a strong second, while print media continues to decline in importance, Valentinavicius said. He cited examples of good and fair outlets in each medium. For print media, he said the business daily 'Verslo Zinios' was the best but had a narrow audience. The website 'www.delfi.lt' was the strongest and biggest among Internet news sites and "they put pressure on the others to be good." He said the private LNK and TV3 were the biggest television broadcasters and were politically neutral, but devoted only a tiny fraction of their resources to news. Lithuanian public television, he said, was still aligned with the Social Democrats who led the previous government. "They've been too much involved in politics and not balanced," he said. "The director needs to be replaced, but that's difficult because there are many legal safeguards to prevent" him from being replaced for political reasons.

¶12. (C) Valentinavicius said the economic crisis would continue to be the top priority and top challenge for the Kubilius government in 2010.

Tolerance issues

¶13. (C) He said communal property restitution to the Jewish community was also high on the GOL's agenda, even though passage of such a law would have political costs. "Politically, it is courageous in Lithuania to do that, because anti-Semitism is very strong, too strong for a normal country," he said. "We need a lot of education to fight anti-Semitism in our own country. Now we have a younger generation who do not remember that Jews existed here, and an older generation who have some anti-Semitic superstitions. And in between, we have 50 years of Soviet propaganda." He

VILNIUS 00000711 003 OF 003

said the Tolerance Center of the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum was doing good work in the area of tolerance education, but that more was needed. The Ambassador said the Embassy would do what it could to participate and assist in efforts to increase tolerance and fight anti-Semitism.

¶14. (C) Valentinavicius also said the Seimas' consideration of a bill to declare information about homosexual relations to be harmful to minors was damaging Lithuania's international reputation, but said progress on such issues could only come slowly. "We have some very clumsy political processes on that. You have zoological homophobes and militant liberals," he said. "But you can't move forward without taking into account that Lithuania is a very conservative and Catholic country. We need to move slowly. Any radical resolution in the parliament is a move that postpones the process."
DERSE